

*Solitude often holds negative connotations. Yet, it is not necessarily a bad thing for scientists. Particularly in an hyper-connected work environment, where team collaboration and instant communications sometimes act like a smokescreen to hide the deep meaning of what scientists individual journey entails. In this deep personal reflection, Francisco Azuaje, senior researcher at the Luxembourg Institute of Health, helps us look at the true benefit of solitude in science.*



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## **In praise of solitude in science**



### **Do scientists and innovators benefit from spending time alone?**

Is a little isolation needed at all for scientists? In an age of big science, interdisciplinarity and large international consortia, the benefits of solitude may not always be obvious. Perhaps people too often confuse solitude with strained loneliness. Or even with an insulting defiance against the tribe or the majority. Thus, being alone at regular intervals may be interpreted as evidence of a bizarre

inability to belong and conform.

## **Positive effect of solitude**

Here, solitude also means a minimum level of seclusion from the incessant electronic noise generated by emails, the instant chatter, social media feeds and the likes.

Many people will accept that, in principle, you do more with fewer distractions. The latter prevent you from prioritizing or completing a task. Thus, after all, solitude is even required for continually 'getting things done.' The concept itself is a contemporary fascination, which is sometimes just a way to meet some measure of performance. It also helps to make us feel a little less dispensable, a little more visible.

When you study, design or experiment, solitude can bring the right cadence. The impulse needed to let you focus on what is important. Not on what is the least expected from you. This, in turn, can make us more creative or prepared for complex problem-solving.

## **Connecting with the world**

Moments of isolation are also important to help us go through the day. And reconcile us with the world around us. You can be there almost always surrounded by chatter or unsolicited intrusion. And, suddenly, you choose to go back to your own speed, to an innate serenity. But such a natural rhythm is not necessarily imposed by inactivity and emptiness. It may represent a healing response to allow you to re-assess your work, or that of others.

These are moments that can remind us of the reason behind a job, obligation or mission. They are warranted breaks from the boredom of daily routines. And they can even make us question our very own assumptions; including assumptions about what we take for granted in terms of opportunities and resources.

There is nothing wrong with a sprinkle of loneliness, and even idleness, in our working hours either. It could well represent the preamble to a new exploration, the trigger for deeper questions and their possible answers. Such periods also become crucial instant stimulations that tell you to 'move on!' or 'go deeper!'. These are not calls for laziness. These are windows into possibility.

## **Sense of urgency**

Hours of work in meetings, 'connected' or in shared spaces may be effective in hurrying things up. Or, at least, in giving the impression that we are moving towards an obligatory end. But unremittingly, sharing spaces--for whatever managerial or practical reasons--can also result in a succession of posturing and imitations. And then a look at the watch becomes a desperate attempt to get us out of there!

Time for quiet individual work can give you a true sense of urgency. You accept the importance of the task at hand for what it is, and not as a mere measure of activity.

If individuality is a vital attribute of originality and invention, then we need to create and nurture--for us and for others--more opportunities to be alone. Although discovery and innovation are collective enterprises, all starts, and may as well end, with a single voice. Novel insights and solutions are ultimately conceived as lonesome acts.

## **Valuing solitude**

Thus, you do not have to feel secluded or justify to others the need to be in peace and quiet. Solitude is another companion to help us illuminate our purpose: at the desk, bench or field. Solitude is a right and responsibility. It is also a right and responsible effort to wrestle the erosion produced by communal conformity and the illusion of consensus.

From these simple perspectives, solitude becomes an important work asset for promoting focus, encouraging novel problem-solving and facilitating deep thinking. With a little discipline and tenacity, solitude is transformed into a ritual for meticulously ordering your thoughts and aspirations. It is also an experience that is worth sharing with others to help them dissipate noise and listen better to themselves and others.

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